

# Touring with T

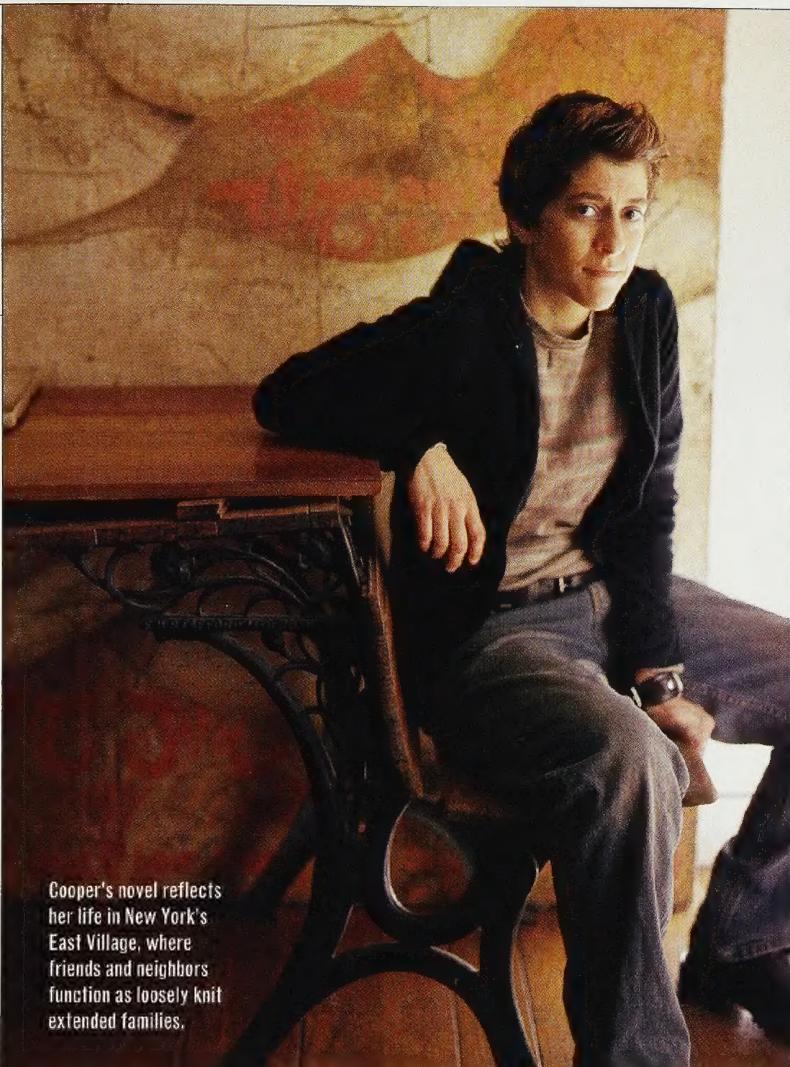
Thanks to her outstanding debut novel, T Cooper wound up seeing the USA on a 30-city tour

By Michele Kort

**I**"I've been to Middle America," says T Cooper with faux gravity, as if she'd just returned from the Lewis and Clark expedition. This past fall, the 30-year-old queer author's first novel, *Some of the Parts* (Akashic Books), proved to be one of the great successes of the year in GLBT fiction and was chosen by Barnes & Noble for its Discover Great New Writers program. That meant the book—which skillfully knits together the disparate lives of a healthy but HIV-positive gay man, the handsome genderfucking woman he lives with, his beautiful but directionless bisexual niece, and his lonely divorced straight sister—would be displayed prominently for three months in every B&N bookstore in America. Cooper, while on a 30-city tour, stopped to sign copies at each one she passed.

"I've been to 75 or 80 stores," she says while sipping tea in Los Angeles's Venice neighborhood, near where she grew up. "And authors don't just pop into Normal, Ill."

Let alone authors as out of the norm as Cooper, whose appealingly boyish personal style makes people occasionally question her presence in ladies' rooms—not unlike the questioning faced by the character Isak in *Parts*, who goes so far as to appear in a carnival sideshow as an "Is it a boy or a girl?" freak. Cooper has also been a member of the Backdoor Boys, a New York City drag king boy-band parody quartet who turned the sup-



Cooper's novel reflects her life in New York's East Village, where friends and neighbors function as loosely knit extended families.

posedly innocent "I Want It That Way" into a paean to anal sex.

"On the surface it might seem I'm more similar to Isak, but in some ways I relate more to Arlene (the straight sister) than anyone else," says Cooper, who insists the book isn't autobiographical. Called T (short for Teresa) since childhood, she grew up in an intact family with her older brother; her mother worked in radio promotion,

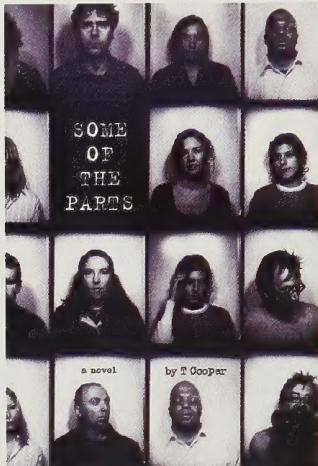
and her father wrote songs such as Donny and Marie's "A Little Bit Country, A Little Bit Rock and Roll." Yet her book explores a postnuclear 21st-century family. "There are a lot of people around the East Village"—where she now lives with her girlfriend, founder of the women's bookstore Bluestockings, and their miniature pinscher, Murray—"who take the families they were given and leave them, then ►

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make their own. I'm surrounded by straight people, gay people, artists, nonartists—it doesn't matter. We watch each other's kids, walk each other's dogs, took care of each other when September 11 happened. I wanted to look at that kind of family."

Cooper studied writing at Middlebury College in Vermont and at Columbia University in Manhattan, where her mentors included Michael Cunningham, the out author of *The Hours*. She has worked as a magazine writer-researcher and as a high school teacher and tutor to support her fiction, and her nonfiction efforts include an essay in the recent anthology *Dog Culture* (Lyons Press). She's currently mulling another "family" project—a novel about lower east side immigrants in the pre-World War I era. Again, it's not autobiographical, she says, but her own Jewish family did come to the New World from Russia, Poland, and Latvia.

Meanwhile, Cooper has a few more B&N stores to call on. "It's kind of comforting to know that their program is interested in my kind of fiction," she says. "It's not even about making money, but about getting the support to go on writing." ■

*Kort* is the author of *Soul Picnic: The Music and Passion of Laura Nyro*.

## TOP 10 BOOKS



### 1 *Fingersmith*

**Sarah Waters**  
Lesbian love in the gutters of Victorian London—a world-class yarn.

### 2 *At Swim, Two Boys*

**Jamie O'Neill**  
Sprawling saga of secret gay love amid Ireland's troubles.

### 3 *Some of Us Did Not Die*

**June Jordan**  
The late writer shines in essays from the '60s to September 11.

### 4 *You Are Not a Stranger Here*

**Adam Haslett**  
Sharp stories by an openly gay law student; a *Today* show pick.

### 5 *Running With Scissors*

**Augusten Burroughs**  
A boy's crazy mom pawns him off on her crazier shrink—a memoir soon to be a film.

### 6 *Some of the Parts*

**T Cooper**  
Sometime drag king Cooper conjures postmodern family.

### 7 *Letters to Montgomery Clift*

**Noel Alumit**  
A gay Los Angeles Filipino's coming-of-age story—marvelous.

### 8 *Dress Codes*

**Noelle Howey**  
*Good Morning America* touted this book by the child of a transsexual dad.

### 9 *Love in a Dark Time*

**Colm Tóibín**  
Musings on the meanings of gay love in the old coded days.

### 10 *Screening Party*

**Dennis Hensley**  
Wicked L.A. hipsters clobber movies we love to hate.

COOPER: DAN CHAVIN FOR THE ADVOCATE